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Adam Silver and the Complexity of New Racism

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Abstract

This paper argues that NBA Commissioner Adam Silver's rhetorical performance in response to the racist comments made by former L.A. Clippers owner Donald Sterling in April 2014 exemplifies whiteness and contributes to what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) calls color-blind racism. The paper examines how Silver's rhetorical performance resembles that of David Stern's performance of White hegemonic masculinity in response to "Malice at the Palace", as identified by Griffin and Calaffel (2011), but differs in many regards, exemplifying the complex and often dialectical nature of "new racism".

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver and the Complexity of New Racism

They caught big game on a slow news day, so they put his head on a pike, dubbed him Lord of the Flies, and danced around him whooping. I don't blame them. I'm doing some whooping right now. Racists deserve to be paraded around the modern town square of the television screen so that the rest of us who believe in the American ideals of equality can be reminded that racism is still a disease that we haven't yet licked. (Abdul-Jabbar, 2014).

On April 25, 2014 *TMZ* released a tape containing racial comments by Donald Sterling, the owner of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Los Angeles Clippers (*TMZ*, 2014). By April 29, 2014 NBA Commissioner Adam Silver fined Sterling 2.5 million dollars on behalf of the NBA and banned Sterling for life from any affiliation with the NBA, including his ownership of the Clippers (Zillgitt, 2014). Immediately following Sterling's lifetime ban from the NBA, Silver received praise and recognition by current and former NBA players and coaches, media, and fans for his leadership and firm stance against racism (Cacciola & Futterman, 2014). Armour (2014) states in a *USA Today* online article "...Silver is the new American hero. His lifetime ban of Donald Sterling and impassioned defense of common decency earned him praise from players, owners and fans, as well as everyday folks who just wanted to see the right thing done and were thrilled someone had the courage to do it." By August 12, 2014 the team had been sold to Steve Ballmer, the former CEO of Microsoft and the episode faded from news media coverage (Felt, 2014).

Donald Sterling's comments and Adam Silver's response and overall support from NBA players, fans, and the media brought forth a discussion of racism in the U.S. and the NBA among

basketball fans and many non-NBA followers. In light of these discussions, I examine Adam Silver's public statements in response to Donald Sterling's comments as a rhetorical performance that contributes to racial inequality within the NBA. Griffin and Calafell (2011) suggest that sport, such as the NBA, is a pedagogical space that "is instructive of how racial hierarchies in the United States reflect larger systems of domination." (p. 117). Furthermore, the critique of professional sport, such as the NBA, offers insight to how the league is a site of struggle over the meaning of race (Griffin & Calafell, 2011). Similar to Griffin (2012), Griffin and Calafell (2011), and Griffin and Phillips (2014), I seek to add new understanding of how racial inequality is enforced and reinforced through the rhetorical performance of those in power in professional sports, and specifically in the NBA. I argue that Silver's rhetorical performance resembles that of David Stern's response to "Malice at the Palace" as identified by Griffin and Calafell (2011), but differs in many regards, exemplifying the complex and dialectical nature of "new racism". New racism, also known as covert racism, is overtly enforced through social interactions and the law. In contrast to pre-Civil Rights era racism, new racism includes the ideology of color-blindness, which otherizes indirectly rather than explicitly (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

This paper seeks to contribute to critical intercultural communication and intercultural rhetoric. As such, it attempts to reveal and examine how structures of power and macro conditions historically create and reinforce racial inequality in the present day (Nakayama & Halualani, 2013). Intercultural rhetoric is a project within rhetorical studies that examines diverse cultural assumptions and understandings revealed when people act rhetorically (Shuter, 1999). To understand the rhetorical power and possibilities of White positionality, this paper follows the lead of Nakayama and Krizek (1995) who suggest to first identify (or name) whiteness by

mapping its space. Color-blind racism is an expression that explains the contemporary trend to believe and communicate the problematic idea that racial inequality has been achieved despite the vast structural inequalities between races that thrive (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). I argue that Adam Silver's rhetorical performance exemplifies whiteness and is situated within a culture that claims color-blindness, and thus it contributes to color-blind racism.

This paper examines readily available public statements made by Adam Silver during and after his public press conference about Donald Sterling on April 19, 2014. The data was limited to statements about the NBA and Donald Sterling directly by Adam Silver from verifiable sources. The data were gathered by searching for Silvers name and paired terms or phrases, including Silver's name and terms likely to provide pertinent results. There were limited results of his public rhetoric, as he is new to his public position. The data gathered and presented are representative of Silver's public rhetoric about the NBA, Donald Sterling's comments, and issues of race and the NBA in the days and months following Silver's press conference.

In the following, I provide a summary of Donald Sterling's comments which led to Silver's press conference and subsequent comments and interviews. I then present an overview of new racism, Bonilla-Silva's concept of color-blind racism, and whiteness in scholarly literature. Following this, I identify and elaborate upon three primary themes found in Adam Silver's rhetoric. First, Adam Silver's performance of White privilege in response to Sterling's comments contributes to color-blind racism. Secondly, although Silver condemns explicit racist language, he does not fully address racial disparities in power in the NBA. Third, Silver's rhetorical performance communicates the value of Black players' perspective and speaks of a partnership, thus indicating the complexity of new racism.

Donald Sterling's Comments

Former L.A. Clippers owner Donald Sterling was thrust into the media spotlight when an audio recording of him stating to his biracial girlfriend that he did not want her to bring Black people to Clippers basketball games, was released by *TMZ* (2014). He stated the following:

I support them (Black players) and give them food, and clothes, and cars, and houses.

Who gives it to them? Does someone else give it to them? Do I know that I have—Who makes the game? Do I make the game, or do they make the game? Is there 30 owners, that created the league?. (TMZ, 2014)

Sterling's statement implies that he sees himself as an owner of the Black players who is kind enough to "give them food, and clothes, and cars, and houses." He sees himself as a person of power and honor, a White male similar to a slave owner, who shares his wealth with the lowly Black men, similar to slaves without honor or respect, who have not in fact earned their wealth through their talents and hard work, but instead, have received it through charity. According to Leverenz (2012), Whites who shame Blacks, do so to reconsolidate their power rather than to actually make Blacks feel ashamed. This is evident in Sterling's interview with Anderson Cooper following the audio recordings' release to the public in which he shames Magic Johnson for having AIDS and also shames the Black community for not helping one another the way Jewish people help each other (Estrada & Shoichet, 2014). Therefore Sterling's intent may have not been so much to harm Black men as it was to reassert his own power. It is not possible, however, to assert power in this manner without causing harm.

His comments made in the audio recording and his interview with Anderson Cooper resemble a slave owner who feeds, clothes, and supports a slave so that, and only so that, he can

then financially benefit from their physical performance. As such, he perpetuates the slave owner mentality in the NBA. During the days of slavery in the U.S., Whites used racial shaming, humiliation, and fear to make Blacks feel like outsiders who were tolerated only for their labor. This shaming continued for generations, reaffirming the so-called honor of their whiteness and righteousness of their mastery over Blacks (Leverenz, 2012). This form of overt racism enacted by Sterling, while still present in many forms throughout the U.S., has grown to become socially unacceptable since the Civil Rights movement, and has been replaced by “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

New Racism

I conceptualize racism as an ideology that contributes to the unequal distribution of power and resources according to racial designations within society. Racism is a socio-political ideology that organizes the composition of racial relations and racial disparities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). This can vary from country to country, but in the U.S. Bonilla-Silva (2014) describes racism as “...a network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of the various races” (p. 26). Domination of one racial group over “other” racial groups is a key component of racism. Within U.S. society, White individuals are usually placed at the top of the racial hierarchy over any other designation considered to be non-White, namely Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Middle Easterners, and Native Americans, to name a few. Critical Race Theory holds that the domination of one race, usually Whites, over another race is maintained through social control and public policy, which in contemporary society has moved from overt to covert (Bell, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The move from overt to covert racism is due to color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Color-Blind Racism. New racism, also known as covert racism, is in contrast to the Jim Crow era (pre-civil rights movement) in which racism was overtly enforced through social interactions and the law. Within new racism, the ideology of color-blindness does not rely on explicit use of racial epithets or slurs, but instead otherizes more indirectly (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). For instance, instead of name calling or using hate speech, within color-blind racism, which is part of new racism, individuals may say, “these people are human, too” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 3). Within this color-blind society, many Whites use a variety of semantics strategies to avoid appearing racist or to avoid being called a racist, as it is profoundly socially undesirable to receive such a criticism or label (Bonilla-Silva, 2000; 2014; van Dijk, 1987). According to van Dijk (1987) these semantic moves serve to preserve a positive self-impression, or to avoid loss of face, while simultaneously engaging in negative-other presentation. Bonilla-Silva further explains that just as Jim Crow racism defended a brutal and overt system of inequality and segregation, color-blind racism works as an “ideological armor” for a more covert institutionalized system since the civil rights era. This new ideology creates and reinforces White privilege and perpetuates whiteness without identifying who the subjects are and who those benefiting are (2014). The concept of whiteness, therefore, is essential in the current racial structure.

Whiteness

Ruth Frankenberg (1993) uses the term “whiteness” to describe a location from which White people, both men and women, experience racial privilege and structural advantage. Whiteness, then is seated at the top of new racism’s hierarchy, with those who are non-White situated below it. Whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically,

and culturally produced, and are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination (Frankenberg, 1993). Whiteness is a location from which White people look at themselves, at others, and at society. It is a set of cultural practices that are usually unidentified and unnamed, meaning, individuals often do not perceive or acknowledge these practices. The privileged position of whiteness, often known as White privilege, is not permanent and reserved, but rather, it is static, allowing for those who occupy it to change through time and space. For instance, Jews and Italians are now considered White who in the past were marginalized as non-White (Luconi, 2011). Some Black, Latino, and Middle Eastern individuals are able to “pass” as White, while some Asian Americans are considered “honorary Whites” (Valdez Young, 2009). Whiteness, therefore, can best be understood as a social or racial construction rather than genetically distinct categories of humankind (Haney Lopez, 2000).

Many Whites have taken on the ideology of color-blind racism, which acquired popularity in the 1960s, explains contemporary racial inequality as a result of non-racial dynamics (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Many Whites who believe that the U.S. is a color-blind society problematically rationalize the status of people of color as the result of “market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (p. 2). The ideology of color-blind racism falsely assumes that if non-White individuals do not succeed in U.S. society, it is not because of a system that is structured against them, but rather, the reason is due to their own flaws, lack of work ethic, poor decision-making, and a variety of other choices made by those individuals or their families. Furthermore, within this color-blind society, the U.S. is problematically understood to be a “post-racial” society, meaning race is no longer an influential factor in one’s lived experience. Supporters of this color-blind mentality often cite that having a

Black president who is serving a second term is proof of the U.S.'s color-blind status (Leverenz, 2012). Racial inequality, however, is created and recreated through new racism, which is overt, subtle, and institutionalized (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Whiteness is socially and rhetorically created within society, as all races are, giving it unique meanings within different historical periods (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Mahoney, 1997). Human interaction, rather than natural differentiation, determines whiteness's racial categorization (Haney Lopez, 2000). Understanding whiteness as a construction allows one to deconstruct it to examine its influence on micro and macro social and political struggles. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) explain, "By viewing whiteness as a rhetorical construction, we avoid searching for any essential nature to whiteness. Instead, we seek an understanding of the ways that this rhetorical construction makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over everyday life" (p. 293). Through a deconstruction of whiteness, one element that can be examined is its invisibility. By examining the rhetoric of Adam Silver in response to Donald Sterling's racist comments, we can understand how whiteness exerts control over the NBA in ways often unseen.

McIntosh (1992) argues that many White individuals are carefully encultured to not recognize White privilege, just as most males are taught to not acknowledge male privilege. Rather, many Whites utilize their whiteness, consciously or unconsciously, as a framework to classify people and understand their social locations (Crenshaw, 2009). This invisibility of whiteness is an essential element of new racism, which also is arguably invisible to those who are White. In addition, even though many White people understand that whiteness is associated with privilege, they do not acknowledge their own privilege because they view themselves as

average, non-racist, nonracial, and racially neutral (Crenshaw, 1990; Frankenberg, 1993; Martin, Trego, & Nakayama, 2010; Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1996; McIntosh, 1992).

Furthermore, many Whites are encultured to create and recreate whiteness through the production of an illusion of a White world, while draining whiteness of any elements that would mark it as a structural or cultural location (Moon, 1999). Because many White people often view themselves as neutral or without race, they often are not aware that they are creating and recreating illusions of White worlds. Due to the invisibility of whiteness's presence and influence, it is essential that individuals name and uncover whiteness as a racial and cultural space within a racially structured society.

Naming Whiteness. By naming whiteness, one recognizes and understands how it historically has molded, and continues to mold, White people's lived experiences and identities. In doing so, one displaces whiteness from its "unmarked, unnamed status" which is an outcome of domination (Frankenberg, 1993). By naming whiteness, the critic calls out its centrality and reveals its invisible position because the center (which is the space where whiteness thrives) is protected by strategic rhetorics that work to keep whiteness at the top of the racial hierarchy. Whiteness, then, contains great power. Offering social, professional, and financial benefits not offered to non-Whites. This results in "otherness" or moving people of color to the margins, causing contemporary (new) racism (Frankenberg, 1993; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). This has been demonstrated, for instance, in the context of basketball (Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Calafell, 2011; Griffin & Phillips, 2014) and baseball (Butterworth, 2007). This center is a place of privilege and assumed racelessness in which Whites can speak and act in ways that the raced and unprivileged may not (Frankenberg, 1993). The term "privilege" comes with both negative and

positive connotations, but inherently assumes that all desire this characteristic. The term “privilege” contributes to the egocentric characteristic of whiteness, in which Whites assume all who are White are normal, and therefore desirable, and all who are non-White are abnormal, and therefore undesirable (McIntosh, 1992). In the following section, I seek to name whiteness in Adam Silver’s rhetorical performance in response to racist comments made by L.A. Clipper’s former owner Donald Sterling. In addition to naming whiteness, I situate Silver’s rhetorical performance of White privilege within Bonilla-Silva’s concept of a color-blind society and discuss its contribution to the complexity of new racism (2014).

Adam Silver’s Rhetorical Performance

On April 29, 2014 NBA Commissioner Adam Silver held a press conference to communicate a response on behalf of the NBA concerning the racist comments made by former L.A. Clippers owner Donald Sterling. At the press conference, he fined Sterling 2.5 million dollars and banned Sterling for life from any affiliation with the NBA, including his ownership of the Clippers (Zillgitt, 2014). Silver had only previously taken office as the commissioner on February 1, 2014, making this his first major appearance in the media spotlight. As a result, this moment served to establish his identity as the new leader of the NBA. Both prior and after this press conference, Silver has made few other appearances. In the following, themes are presented from his April 29, 2014 press conference and a rare *USA Today* interview.

Silver and White Privilege

Griffin (2012) argues that the NBA is a racialized space. Specifically, Griffin argues that the NBA reflects the U.S.’s slave owning history, as White owners acquire wealth from the athletic performance of Black athletes. Griffin and Calafell (2011) state, “the industry of

professional basketball represents, reflects, and reifies historical constructions of Blackness and whiteness” (p. 119). This is revealed in their analysis of Stern’s rhetorical performance regarding the 2005 NBA dress code. In this instance, Stern imposed whiteness on the NBA by enforcing an upper-class, White dress code for all players and banned players from wearing clothes, jewelry, and shoes associated with hip-hop culture to any NBA function (Griffin & Calafell, 2011). Silver, a White, Jewish, college educated, upper-class male, is privileged. *Sports Illustrated* labels him “privileged and unconventional” on the cover of their May 26th, 2014 issue. While he reigns from a location of White privilege, his rhetorical performance surrounding Donald Sterling utilizes the advantages of that privilege for the benefit of NBA, by offering resistance to and punishment for Sterling’s explicitly racist comments. According to McIntosh (1992), the word privilege can appear misleading. McIntosh explains that the word “privilege” connotes being something everyone must want and it implies dominance and control due to one’s race or sex. In this situation, Adam Silver is a White male in a position of power in the NBA, which many probably desire. His privilege reins not only from being a White male, but also from his executive position, socio-economic status, education, and various other factors. According to McIntosh, this kind of privileged position gives one permission to commit acts that may not be beneficial to society, and certainly should not be desirable. Therefore, while privilege may equate with power, it does not equate with moral strength. In fact, privilege may appear as strength, when it can actually be permission to dominate or escape (McIntosh, 1992).

In this situation, Adam Silver utilizes his position of privilege and power as the leader of the NBA, which was secured through a privileged upbringing and first-class education, to speak against explicitly racist language. This contrasts Donald Sterling’s use of privilege and power as

a White, male, NBA team owner, to dominate. Sterling showcases his lack of moral strength, while Silver showcases moral direction. Silver does this by both condemning Sterling for his racial prejudice and by communicating personal distraught. This is evident in the following lines:

The views expressed by Mr. Sterling are deeply offensive and harmful; that they came from an NBA owner only heightens the damage and my personal outrage.

Accordingly, effective immediately, I am banning Mr. Sterling for life from any association with the Clippers organization or the NBA. Mr. Sterling may not attend any NBA games or practices. He may not be present at any Clippers facility, and he may not participate in any business or player personnel decisions involving the team. He will also be barred from attending NBA Board of Governors meetings or participating in any other league activity. I am also fining Mr. Sterling \$2.5 million, the maximum amount allowed under the NBA constitution.

I am personally distraught that the views expressed by Mr. Sterling came from within an institution that has historically taken such a leadership role in matters of race relations...

Therefore, while White privilege gives one power and permission to commit acts which may not benefit society, it also gives one permission to commit acts for the good of society- those which are desirable.

Silver and Color-Blind Racism. In utilizing his position of power to take a stance against overt racism in the NBA and society, Silver's rhetorical performance was expected, according to Bonilla-Silva's (2014) theory of color-blind racism. As a result, Silver further

reinforces a color-blind society. This is because in a color-blind society, overt racism, such as that communicated by Donald Sterling, is unacceptable and punishable (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Adam Silver's expressed disgust is assumed because to communicate anything but disgust or sadness, would be counter to societal expectations. He is expected to make statements such as, "I am personally distraught that the views expressed by Mr. Sterling," and "This has been a painful moment for all members of the NBA family."

One of Silver's goals as NBA commissioner is to ensure the financial future of the NBA. If Silver were to not reprimand such behavior, this would surely result in financial loss for the NBA. Fans and sponsors of the NBA would not support a team or a league that allowed such racism to come from an owner of a team, and thus would withdraw their support. This was evident in the immediate response of fans and sponsors from the L.A. Clippers. Immediately following the release of Sterling's comments, team sponsors cancelled their sponsorship, including CarMax, State Farm Insurance, Kia Motors America, airline Virgin America, P. Diddy's water brand, AQUAhydrate, Red Bull, Yokohama tires and Mercedes-Benz (Moore, 2014).

Because Silver responds to Sterling's comments in a way that met the fans' and sponsors' expectations, Silver is not necessarily looking out for the best interest of the NBA's players, but rather, is seeking to secure the financial stability of the NBA. His rhetorical performance, therefore, is a form of interest convergence (Bell, 2004). Essentially, he appears to be looking out for the best interest of the majority Black players, which may have been part of his intentions, but also, he is looking out for the NBA as an institution. Looking out for the best interest of the NBA is his first priority as the NBA commissioner. This turns out to be effective, as the Clipper's fan base was maintained and the sponsors who backed out, eventually came back, according to

the sponsors shown on Clippers website, thus securing the stability of the L.A. Clippers (NBA.com, 2014).

Silver also contributes to color-blind racism in a *USA Today* interview (Armour, 2014) in which he states, “It’s an equal opportunity league and judgment should come from what players can do on the floor, not their race, ethnicity, sexuality, or anything else. And again, so much credit goes to David Stern for building those values into the league over the past thirty years.” Stating that individuals should be judged in society for their performance rather than their race is a common claim in color-blind ideology. It’s the “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” mentality.” The ideology of color-blind racism falsely assumes that race is no longer a factor in individuals’ lived experiences. Therefore, if non-White people do not succeed professionally or financially, it is because of their own lack of work ethic, poor decision-making, individual flaws, and poor life choices. It is not because of a system that is structured against them (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Silver and Structural Racism

While Adam Silver’s rhetorical performance admonished overt racism, Silver failed to address the systemic racial disparities in the NBA. Donald Sterling’s explicit racism was only a small glimpse into the reality of structural racism in the NBA. He has a history of racial discrimination including a 2006 lawsuit by the U.S. Department of Justice for housing discrimination. Allegedly, he had stated, “Black tenants smell and attract vermin.” In 2009, he reportedly paid \$2.73 million in a Justice Department suit alleging that he had discriminated against individuals renting homes from him, including Blacks, Hispanics, and families with children. In that same year, a Clippers general manager, former L.A. Lakers star, and NBA hall

of famer Elgin Baylor, sued Sterling for employment discrimination based on race and age. He stated that Sterling had a plantation-style mentality (Abdul Jabar, 2014; Fenno, 2014).

These past behaviors left many associated with the NBA, such as NBA legend and former L.A. Clippers coach Kareem Abdul Jabar, questioning why the NBA did not take action towards Sterling for these actions, but only chose to fine and remove him when he made racially charged comments about Blacks. In an op-ed piece for *Time*, after listing Sterling's prior behavior, Abdul Jabar (2014) states

What bothers me about this whole Donald Sterling affair isn't just his racism. I'm bothered that everyone acts as if it's a huge surprise. Now there's all this dramatic and very public rending of clothing about whether they should keep their expensive Clippers season tickets. Really? All this other stuff I listed above has been going on for years and this ridiculous conversation with his girlfriend is what puts you over the edge? That's (his emphasis) the smoking gun? (Abdul Jabar, 2014)

Comments made by former players and coaches like Abdul-Jabbar confirm what Griffin and Calafell (2011) have claimed about the culture of the NBA. Griffin and Calafell (2011) analyzed former NBA Commissioner David Stern's performance of White masculine rhetoric in response to the 2004 brawl at the Palace of Auburn Hills between players from the Indiana Pacers and Detroit Pistons fans and the 2005 NBA dress code. Within their analysis, they situate Stern as a leader and contributor of White hegemonic masculinity in the culture of the NBA. They argue that his rhetoric demonstrated a political performance that was rampant with racialized messages concerning power, privilege, and control, which ultimately contributed to a culture based on these same characteristics.

Racial Disparities in the NBA. Upon analysis of the racial breakdown of those in power in the NBA, one can see that there is an unequal distribution of power between Whites and people of color in the NBA, with Whites holding significantly more positions of power than people of color. This is problematic because 77% of all NBA players are African American, 80.5% are people of color, and 20.6% are international players. Therefore, those overseeing the predominantly Black players are overwhelmingly White, which perpetuates the problem of White power. For instance, the NBA currently only has two owners of color: Michael Jordan, who is Black, of the Charlotte Hornets, and Vivek Randive, who is Indian, of the Sacramento Kings. There are also only twenty-two minority owners of color. Seven of those twenty-two are minority owners of the Charlotte Hornets, meaning one third of the minority owners, and one of the two majority owners of color are all associated with the Charlotte Hornets. Therefore, there is not an even distribution of people of color in leadership in the NBA, as a significant percentage are affiliated with only one team, the Charlotte Hornets. Furthermore, only 23.3% of NBA general managers are people of color. Six are African American (20%) and one is Asian American (3.33%). African Americans hold seven of the top executive positions, which includes CEOs and team presidents (Lapchick, Donovan, Loomer, & Martinez, 2014). In sum, due to a lack of people of color in ownership and decision-making roles for NBA teams, White power is evident in the NBA.

During Silver's press conference, he acknowledges the racial disparities within the NBA when he states:

We're always open to ownership from people of all races, nationalities, ethnicities. As you know we have an African American primary owner in the league right now. Shaquille

O'Neal just became a small owner of the Sacramento Kings. David Robinson is an owner of the San Antonio Spurs. Vivek Ranadive, a person of color born in Mumbai, India, just became the primary owner of the Sacramento Kings. So I believe we have a very diverse league, but I'd always like to see it become more diverse.

His acknowledgement of racial disparities, however, does not necessarily indicate that he will take action to eliminate such disparities. On December 8, 2014, only eight months after Donald Sterling's comments were released, NBA players wore shirts that read "I Can't Breathe" in place of their warmup shirts to bring attention to discriminatory policing tactics in Black communities. In response, Silver stated that he respected players for "voicing their personal views on important issues, but my preference would be for players to abide by our on-court attire rules." (Boren, 2014). Through this response, it is evident that Silver's concern is first and foremost for the branding of the NBA, and not for making progress towards racial equality at the systematic level.

Bonilla-Silva (2014) states that because racism is a problem of unequal distribution of power, the intentions of individuals are largely irrelevant to the explanation of social outcomes. Anti-racists must take action and engage to eradicate the practices and ideologies, and thus the system that produces and maintains the system of White power and racial oppression. Therefore, Silver's stance against racism cannot be determined by his good intentions during his press conference, but instead, must be determined by the strategic decisions that he makes to eliminate racial disparities in the NBA's hierarchy of power. As Bonilla Silva (2014) states, "Individual racial tension without a political praxis to eliminate the system that produces racial inequality amounts to racial showboating." (p. 305).

Silver and the Complexity of New Racism

In a sports culture that is characterized by White owners and executives overseeing predominantly Black players, Adam Silver, also a White male, contributes to this White power. His rhetorical performance during the NBA press conference that delivered Donald Sterling his punishment, resembles the performance of White hegemonic masculinity that Griffin and Calafell (2011) identify in former NBA Commissioner David Stern's rhetoric. While it is similar in many ways, however, Adam Silver's message is full of contradictions, which emphasize the complexity and dialectical nature of racism. While he asserts his White hegemonic masculinity, he also creates a space in which Black players and coaches are valued.

Adam Silver, a White Jewish male, replaced David Stern, also a White Jewish male, as NBA commissioner following Stern's retirement on February 1, 2014. Prior to his position as commissioner, Silver worked alongside Stern for twenty years and was intimately involved in the NBA's business during its time of growth in the early nineties (Cacciola, Jones, & Futterman, 2014). He held five different influential positions within the NBA while working alongside David Stern. He worked as Deputy Commissioner and Chief Operating Officer from July 1, 2006 to January 31, 2014 where he was involved in franchise sales stadium development, labor negotiations, and television deals (Cacciola, Jones, & Futterman, 2014). Prior to this, he held the position as President and COO of NBA Entertainment for more than eight years. He has also served as Senior VP & COO of NBA Entertainment, NBA Chief of Staff, and Special Assistant to the Commissioner (NBA.com, 2014).

In Griffin and Calafell's (2011) analysis of Stern's rhetoric concerning the 2004 "Malice at the Palace," Griffin and Calafell cite Stern's quote, "The actions of the players involved wildly

exceeded the professionalism and self-control that should fairly be expected from NBA players” (p. 124). The authors explain that the players who were involved in the brawl, such as Ron Artest and Stephen Jackson, received various levels of game suspensions. Through these punishments, Griffin and Calafell imply that Stern completely dismissed the perspective of Black players and overlooked their knowledge and experience of what it means to be Black men in the U.S., contributing to his rhetorical strategy to keep whiteness at the center and Blackness in the margins. This analysis reveals that the commissioner’s (White) perspective is the only perspective communicated through Stern’s rhetoric, not the players (Black) perspective, which supports the authors’ argument that Stern embodies White hegemonic masculinity. Because Adam Silver worked so closely with David Stern at this time, it is inevitable that he had a role in this decision making, thus contributing also to White hegemonic masculinity, and thus racial disparities, in the NBA.

Silver was faced with a similar situation in which action needed to be taken towards an individual associated with the NBA for socially undesirable behavior; however, Silver approached the situation similarly in some regards, and different in others. His response validates the complexity of racism, demonstrating that it is often characterized by contradictions. First, he utilized a rhetorical performance of White hegemonic masculinity similar to David Stern, as identified by Griffin and Calafell (2011). Hegemonic masculinity is identified by its emphasis on overt displays of power, force, and patriarchy (Trujillo, 1991). Aggressive team sports, such as basketball and football, have symbolized masculinity in U.S. culture. Therefore, Adam Silver’s rhetorical performance is consistent with the ideals of masculine sport culture. Hegemonic masculinity is often paired with whiteness to further one’s message of power. Silver used this to

reach his goal as a new leader to assert his competency and leadership. This is evident in his ownership of the apology and punishment delivered during the press conference with his repeated use individualistic language such as “I” and “my” throughout. A few examples are as follows:

The views expressed by Mr. Sterling are deeply offensive and harmful; that they came from an NBA owner only heightens the damage and my personal outrage.

I am personally distraught that the views expressed by Mr. Sterling came from within an institution that has historically taken such a leadership role in matters of race relations...

To...Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Sweetwater Clifton, the Great Bill Russell, and particularly Magic Johnson, I apologize.

Accordingly, effective immediately, I am banning Mr. Sterling for life from any association with the Clippers organization or the NBA.

While Stern devalued Black players in the NBA during his apology and delivery of punishments after the “Malice at the Palace” incident, Silver in contrast creates a space in which racist comments are unwelcome and punishable. This may contribute to color-blind racism, as explained previously, but Silver also communicates the value of NBA players as individuals. This is in contrast to siding with White ownership and indicating that Black players are in the NBA for White fans’ entertainment and the White owners’ financial profit (Griffin & Calafell, 2011). This is exemplified when Silver stated the following during his press conference:

As for Mr. Sterling's ownership, interest in the Clippers, I will urge the Board of Governors to exercise its authority to force a sale of the team and will do everything in my power to ensure that that happens. This has been a painful moment for all members of the NBA family. I appreciate the support and understanding of our players during this process, and I am particularly grateful for the leadership shown by Coach Doc Rivers, Union President Chris Paul and Mayor Kevin Johnson of Sacramento, who has been acting as the players' representative in this matter. We stand together in condemning Mr. Sterling's views. They simply have no place in the NBA. (CBS Los Angeles, 2014)

In the following examples, he states that the views of Sterling have caused current and former players, coaches, and fans to question their loyalty to the league. This is due to the hurtful, offensive, and harmful nature of Sterling's words.

I am personally distraught that the views expressed by Mr. Sterling came from within an institution that has historically taken such a leadership role in matters of race relations and caused current and former players, coaches, and fans of the NBA to question their very association with the league. To them and pioneers of the game like Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Sweet Water Clifton, the great Bill Russell and particularly Magic Johnson, I apologize. (CBS Los Angeles, 2014)

The views expressed by Mr. Sterling are deeply offensive and harmful. That they came from an NBA owner only heightens the damage and my personal outrage. Sentiments of this kind are contrary to the principals of inclusion and respect that form the foundation of our diverse, multicultural, and multiethnic league.

...do what they need to do to and play at the highest level in the world and have them hanging over this I think caused me to have a certain sadness I would say about the entire situation. I think this is regardless of anyone's religion, ethnicity, nationality. I think this is incredibly hurtful.

By apologizing to current and former players, predominantly who are Black, and acknowledging the harmful and offensive nature of Sterling's message, Silver acknowledges the effect that Sterling's comments may have had on people of color. In doing so, he recognizes their viewpoint rather than disregarding it. This recognition communicates value. This is essential to de-marginalizing the current and former Black players and moving whiteness out of the center of perspective. Furthermore, Silver's reference to "inclusion" and a "diverse, multicultural, and multiethnic league" again removes whiteness from the center, allowing for diverse individuals' perspectives to again be recognized, thus placing value on them. He also acknowledges that people of color are not in positions of power in the NBA, and would like to see improvements in this area. In doing so, he briefly addresses structural racism in the NBA.

We're always open to ownership from people of all races, nationalities, ethnicities. As you know we have an African American primary owner in the league right now. Shaquille O'Neal just became a small owner of the Sacramento Kings. David Robinson is an owner of the San Antonio Spurs. Vivek Ranadive, a person of color born in Mumbai, India, just became the primary owner of the Sacramento Kings. So I believe we have a very diverse league, but I'd always like to see it become more diverse.

The complexity and contradictory nature and outcome of Silver's rhetorical performance is evident in the Twitter responses of various current and former Black NBA players. Their

responses supported Silver's lifetime ban and 2.5 million dollar fine given to Donald Sterling. The support communicated by current and former Black NBA players confirms what Silver calls the "NBA family" and his intention to "stand together." Therefore, while he may have contributed to color-blind racism and performed White hegemonic masculinity, he still gained the support of Black NBA players for his rhetorical performance. Players' backing of Silver's rhetorical performance reveals the complexity and sometimes contradictory nature of overt racism. Tweets from current and former players communicate this support including the following. Former NBA All-Star Magic Johnson tweeted "Commissioner Silver showed great leadership in banning L.A. Clippers owner Donald Sterling for life" and "Current and former NBA players now know that in Commissioner Adam Silver we have a great leader leading our league." Current *TNT* analyst and former NBA All-Star Shaquille O'Neal tweeted "Way to go, Commissioner Silver! The NBA stands for everybody!". Kevin Johnson, former NBA player, current Mayor of Sacramento, and representative for the NBA players' union tweeted "This was a defining moment for the NBA. We've defined ourselves as an org that won't tolerate ignorance & bigotry. Left no doubt. #proud" (*Sports Illustrated*, 2014). Similarly, current NBA player LeBron James tweeted "Commissioner Silver thank you for protecting our beautiful and powerful league!! Great leader!! #BiggerThanBasketball #StriveForGreatness." Current NBA player Dwayne Wade tweeted "Commissioner Silver....STRONG...way to take charge and protect our great league" (*Sports Illustrated*, 2014).

Discussion

During an impromptu interview with *TMZ*, when Oprah Winfrey was asked her opinion of Donald Sterling's recorded phone conversation containing racist comments towards African

Americans, she stated “We’re all off the plantation. The plantation days are over.” (TMZ, 2014). Griffin and Calafell (2011) argue that the plantation culture that has permeated the NBA for decades was reinforced with rhetorical performances by former NBA Commissioner David Stern concerning controversial incidents such as the brawl at the Palace of Auburn Hills between Indian Pacers players and Detroit Pistons fans, as well as the NBA dress code that was enforced in 2005, which banned clothes related to hip-hop culture. I seek to contribute to Griffin and Calafell’s scholarship by arguing that Commissioner Adam Silver’s rhetorical performance in response to Sterling’s comments resemble that of former Commissioner David Stern by performing White privilege through the use of masculine power. While Commissioner Silver utilized rhetoric to admonish the plantation culture, new racism works much more subtly, and therefore, is still present.

While the rhetorical performance of Silver was similar to that of Stern, this analysis shows that Silver contrasts Stern’s rhetorical performance by admonishing Donald Sterling’s comments with the maximum fine allowed by the NBA and by banishing him from all NBA events. He also spoke of a partnership between himself and current Black NBA players and expressed his value of respect and inclusion, regardless of race, which is contrary to Stern’s tactics. Stern marginalized Black players by using a paternalistic rhetoric, while Silver utilized an inclusive rhetoric. Furthermore, Silver expressed a hope that the NBA ownership would become more diverse, speaking to the racial disparities in NBA team ownership. Complicating matters, Silver’s rhetorical performance which speaks of his disgust towards the views of Donald Sterling, are expected within a Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) concept of a color-blind society. Silver’s

partnership with Black players and the overall support he received from former and current Black players and coaches, however, is not.

Martin and Nakayama (1999) argue that learning about intercultural interactions is a dynamic and changing process and what researchers find is characterized by dialectical tensions, or contradictions. They argue that researchers have to view the relational, contextual, and historical facets of intercultural interactions holistically rather than in isolation to gain further understanding of social realities and thus further understand these dialectics. Consistent with Martin and Nakayama's (1999) dialectical perspective, racism, an important element of social and cultural realities, is a complex and shifting reality characterized by dialectics, as seen in this analysis of Adam Silver's rhetorical performance. In new racism, one is not necessarily either a perpetrator or an ally, but rather, can perform actions and rhetoric that draw from both camps, contradictorily both perpetuating and working to eliminate racism simultaneously. The question then is how do individuals in positions of power and/or privilege manage these contradictions so that U.S. society can move forward towards racial equality?

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